



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840
June 26, 2015

DECISION NOTICE

BLACKLEAF WMA/BLINDHORSE ONA TRAIL

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVE CONSIDERED

Proposed Action

On May 20, 2015, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) published an Environmental Assessment (EA) for a trail improvement project on the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (WMA). FWP, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), proposed to construct a non-motorized access trail from Ostle (Antelope) Reservoir on the WMA to connect with US Forest Service (USFS) Trail 153 through the BLM Blindhorse Outstanding Natural Area (ONA). The trailhead would be located at Ostle Reservoir on the Blackleaf WMA and managed by FWP. The Blackleaf WMA portion of the trail would primarily follow existing two-track roads and trails. A small section of new trail would be constructed. The BLM trail segment would require new trail construction and complete an unencumbered, publicly accessible, non-motorized travel route from Ostle Reservoir to the BLM's Blindhorse ONA. The EA applied only to the portion of the proposed trail on the Blackleaf WMA that is managed by FWP.

No Action

The No Action alternative for this project as described in the EA was no trail improvements. The recreating public, both hikers and horseback riders, would continue to access Blindhorse ONA by traveling 9.5 miles away by road to the Blackleaf Trailhead 106 and then 6 miles by trail or by walking throughout the project area without the benefit of a designated trail.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PUBLIC PROCESS

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of the proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a Draft EA for public review of the proposed action on May 20, 2015 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on June 19th, 2015.

Notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published in the *Great Falls Tribune*, the *Conrad Independent Observer* and the *Choteau Acantha*. Copies of the Draft EA were distributed to interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The Draft EA was available for public review on FWP's web site <http://fwp.mt.gov/> during the public comment period. An FWP public notice was issued May 20, 2015.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received 22 total comments. A breakdown of the comments is as follows: 14 were in support of the No Action Alternative, 7 supported the proposed action alternative, and one, while favoring increased access, suggested an alternate route for the proposed trail.

Those opposing the proposed action cited the following major concerns (received comments often included several concerns):

1. There is no need for the proposed action as two access routes currently exist, USFS Trail 153 from the Blackleaf Trailhead and USFS Trail 177 from Clary Coulee Trailhead (8 comments).

FWP Response: FWP recognized two routes existed to access the Blindhorse ONA, one designated and one undesignated. During initial scoping, comments described the distance of using USFS trail 153 as route for recreation opportunities to the southern end of the Blindhorse ONA as excessive. Comments received regarding use of USFS Trail 177 were that the trail to the Blindhorse ONA is difficult to find and not maintained. The proposed action would have alleviated both issues.

2. Additional access is not needed as the vicinity is already accessible by foot and on horseback (4 comments).

FWP Response: Current access by foot and horseback through the area does exist. Concerns of current access include a braided trail network, fence damage and trespass. FWP felt the proposed action would have addressed these issues.

3. The proposed action would result in increased use of the area and potentially disrupt current deer and elk movement patterns (2 comments).

FWP Response: FWP acknowledges that movement patterns of deer and elk in the area could be altered in response to increased use. However, any disruption in movement patterns was considered to be minor.

4. The proposed action would increase the number of hunters in the area and encourage elk to reside on private land during the hunting season where access is limited (7 comments).

FWP Response: FWP anticipated an initial increase in hunter days in the area following completion of the proposed action and a subsequent return to nominal use. During the initial increase of hunter days, increased use of private land by localized elk may have occurred. Following return to nominal

hunter use, it was anticipated localized elk would return to land use patterns approaching pre-existing conditions. Further, the proposed action would have allowed greater hunter dispersal reducing pressure on localized elk.

5. A new trail would diminish the aesthetic value of the Front (2 comments).

FWP Response: The route of the proposed action was chosen to minimize disturbance to the vista of the area. However, some segments of the proposed trail may have been visible from a distance.

6. The proposed action would unfairly favor hunters on horseback over hunters on foot (3 comments).

FWP Response: The area is currently being used by both foot hunters and horseback hunters. The proposed trail would have been open to all non-motorized use.

7. The proposed action would result in increased hunting and recreational pressure in the area (4 comments).

FWP Response: As stated above, during the hunting season FWP anticipated an initial increase in hunter days in the area following completion of the proposed action and a subsequent return to nominal use. Further, FWP anticipated increased dispersal of hunters with improved access, thereby reducing localized pressure on the Blackleaf WMA. Outside the hunting season, FWP anticipated an increase in recreational use of the area including hiking, sight-seeing and horseback riding.

8. The proposed action would increase the number of hunters on horseback and cause parking area crowding at Ostle Reservoir (1 comment).

FWP Response: FWP anticipated an initial increase in hunter use of area following completion of the proposed action and a subsequent return to nominal use. During this time, there may have been increased use of the parking area. However, FWP recognizes the self-dispersing nature of hunter behavior and believes overcrowding would not have occurred.

9. The proposed action would increase use resulting in the loss of the wildness of the area (2 comments).

FWP Response: The area currently is being used. However, the proposed action would have improved the ease of access and increased recreational use may have occurred reducing the remoteness of the distal parts of the area.

10. The proposed action would require maintenance and weed control. Concerns were raised about the derivation of these funds and who would be responsible for weed control (2 comments).

FWP Response: Care was taken to maximize the use of existing trails and minimize ground disturbance thereby reducing the potential for weed establishment. Nonetheless, FWP acknowledges

that some maintenance and weed control would have been required. The East Slope Backcountry Horsemen agreed to provide maintenance and weed control.

11. The proposed action would increase the potential for trespass onto private property (1 comment).

FWP Response: FWP felt a designated travel route would have decreased the potential for trespass.

12. Comments were received concerning the alternate use of funds, license sales, maintenance of USFS trails and trail closures by USFS, difficulty in commenting, construction of motorized trails (7 comments).

FWP Response: While these comments are duly noted, they are outside the scope of the Draft EA.

Those supporting the proposed action cited the following considerations (received comments often included more than one consideration):

1. The proposed action would allow increased access and recreational opportunity to a difficult area to access (6 comments).

FWP Response: FWP agrees that ease of access to the Blindhorse ONA would have been increased.

2. The proposed action would increase safety with designated route (1 comment).

FWP Response: FWP agrees that a designated route would have increased the safe use of the area.

3. The proposed action would increase the distribution of hunters (1 comment).


FWP Response: FWP agrees that hunters would have had greater opportunity to distribute themselves.

DECISION

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposal to construct a non-motorized trail from Ostle Reservoir to an existing trail system on the Blindhorse ONA received modest support and considerable opposition. Based on the analysis in the EA, along with public comments, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has decided not to proceed with this proposed action. The decision was based primarily on public opinion that sufficient access to the Blindhorse ONA and vicinity currently exists. FWP will investigate the possibility of additional access through adjacent private land to public lands and public wildlife resources.

I have reviewed the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

By notification of this Decision Notice, along with clarifications noted within FWP's responses to comments, the draft EA is hereby made the final EA.



Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Fish and Wildlife Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

7-1-2015
Date